

John Sutcliff

People readily recall the name of **William Carey** as the father of modern missions. But how many remember the name of John Sutcliff, without whom Carey may never have entered either the Baptist ministry or the Indian mission field?

John Sutcliff was born on August 9, 1752, at Strait Hey, a farm near Todmorden in the West Riding of Yorkshire. Raised by godly parents, he came to personal faith in his teens and encouraged by John Fawcett, was baptised and became a member of Wainsgate Baptist Church, near Hebden Bridge.

Sutcliff's hunger for spiritual and academic knowledge gave evidence of his suitability to the pastoral ministry. Commended by the church at Wainsgate, Sutcliff entered the Bristol Baptist Academy in 1772. That he walked the entire 200 miles from home to college, gives an idea of his financial circumstances. It was at Bristol that Sutcliff was influenced by Caleb Evans and encountered the writings of **Jonathan Edwards**. From Edwards, Sutcliff learnt how to combine his commitment to Calvinism with a passion for evangelism and revival.

After gaining preaching experience in Trowbridge, Shrewsbury and Birmingham, Sutcliff was called to the pastorate of Olney, a market town in North Buckinghamshire bordering both Northants and Bedfordshire. His acceptance was somewhat reluctant, but he remained there from 1775 until his death in 1814. He was ordained in 1776, a year after his arrival.

The Baptist cause in **Olney** dates back to the 1660s. When Sutcliff arrived, the congregation had good numbers (the meeting-house having been enlarged in 1763), but was characterised by division. The church had joined the Northamptonshire Baptist Association, founded in 1765. The evangelical cause in Olney was strong.

In addition to the Baptists, **John Newton** had come to the parish church in 1764 where **William Cowper**, hymn writer and poet, became a member. (Newton and Cowper were responsible for the publication, in 1779, of the **Olney Hymns**.)

In Olney, there was also an evangelical Congregationalist

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church practising infant baptism.

Cross-denominational relations were surprisingly good for the period. Newton attended Sutcliff's ordination and when the Northamptonshire Baptist Association held its annual meeting on at least two occasions in the large parish church, Newton was invited to attend and participate. All three churches participated in a shared annual youth service. However, relations between Sutcliff and his congregation were not quite so affable, especially in the early years of Sutcliff's pastorate when there was friction between minister and congregation.

The Baptist Church, like so many others at the time, held to the doctrine of High Calvinism. Sutcliff preached a more moderated evangelical Calvinism. However, he worked hard to unify the church and all of the High Calvinists who had left the congregation before his arrival were restored to membership by 1782.

In 1783 Sutcliff publicly declared his commitment to evangelical Calvinism. This he set out in *The First Principles of the Oracles of God, presented in a Plain and Familiar Catechism, For the Use of Children*. His views were shared by his two close friends **Andrew Fuller** and **John Ryland**.

In the following year these three men Issued the **Prayer Call of 1784**. Following Fuller's sermon to the Association, Sutcliff called upon churches to meet and pray monthly for 'the revival of real religion, and the extension of Christ's kingdom in the world'. The Prayer Call was taken up not only by Baptist churches in the Association but by churches - Baptist and otherwise - across the land. There can be little doubt that It was this Prayer Call that led to the revival of the Baptist cause in England and the formation of the Baptist Missionary Society in 1792.

It was soon after the Prayer Call that Sutcliff was to be influential In the life of William Carey. Carey had been preaching as a layman at both Hackleton and Earls Barton. When the latter considered calling him as their minister, Carey sought the advice of Sutcliff who urged him, out of concern that

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he be sent into the ministry from a more solidly established work, to become a member of Olney. In 1785 Carey preached before the congregation at Olney, but his preaching was not considered good enough for him to proceed to ordination. Under Sutcliff's care, Carey's gifts were nurtured and he preached again the following year, this time with a positive result. Carey was, of course, the first to leave England's shores under the auspices of the new missionary society.

From the end of the 18th century much of Sutcliff's time was taken up away from Olney. In places as far afield as Scotland, he promoted and raised funds for the Society. While others went overseas, he, Fuller and Ryland were the 'ropeholders'.

On the domestic front, Sutcliff did find time however in 1796 to marry one Jane Johnston. They had no children. She was to die just 11 weeks after her husband, her death hurried on no doubt by a broken heart.

In 1798 Sutcliff formed a seminary for missionary and ministerial students. The seminary was in a rented house adjacent to Sutcliff's own home and over the coming years, a total of over three dozen such students came under Sutcliff's expert academic and pastoral tutelage. As well as teaching them and providing them with access to 'one of the finest libraries in the country', he also gave them practical training. Preaching in local villages was a regular requirement of their duties.

One of the first that Sutcliff trained was Daniel Brunsdon who later wrote to Sutcliff from India, giving an eye-witness account of the baptism of **Krishna Pal**, the Missionary Society's and Carey's first convert. What a joy it was to Sutcliff to see his training efforts rewarded and his prayers answered!

In the closing years of his life and ministry, Sutcliff retained an ecumenical outlook. He was an evangelical first and a Baptist second. As well as maintaining a close relationship with Newton and his successors, he also supported, for example, the Bedfordshire Union of Christians, a co-operative venture between Baptists and Congregationalists working together in

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the common cause of village Gospel preaching. But one of the last public acts of Sutcliff was his presence in London in 1813 when he preached at the annual meeting of the Baptist Missionary Society and attended the inaugural meeting of the Baptist Union.

Sutcliff's health, never robust, failed him in February 1814. The evidence suggests he had a heart attack and died on June 22. Andrew Fuller preached the funeral address and concluded on a clear evangelistic note. Sutcliff would have approved.

This is part of a written tribute to Sutcliff that Fuller asked Robert Hall of Arnesby to compose:

'Few men took a deeper interest... in the general state of the church and the propagation of the Gospel abroad. The future glory of the Kingdom of God and the best means of promoting it were his favourite topics and usurped a large part of his thoughts and his prayers; nor was he ever more in his element than when he was exerting his powers in devising plans for its extension.'

By Rev. D. Dewey